

# *Northern Fleet Support of Ground Operations*

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The Northern Fleet was formally established in 1937 using the organization and assets of the Northern Flotilla.<sup>1</sup> In 1940, Admiral A. G. Golovko took command of the Northern Fleet.<sup>2</sup> Joining the Soviet Navy in 1925 and completing a commissioning school in 1928, he served in various surface vessel squadrons in the Black Sea, Baltic, and Pacific Fleets. In 1937–38, he was the Soviet adviser to the Spanish commander of the Cartagena Naval Base. While there, Golovko undoubtedly met Admiral N. G. Kuznetsov, senior Soviet naval adviser to Spain in 1936–37 and the commander in chief of the Soviet Navy in 1944. After a brief tour in the Northern Fleet as commander of a destroyer division and fleet chief of staff, Golovko commanded first the Caspian and then the Amur Flotillas. At the age of thirty-three, Golovko became the youngest fleet commander in the Soviet Navy.<sup>3</sup>

By the beginning of the war with Germany in 1941, the Northern Fleet consisted of units of submarines, destroyers, minesweepers, subchasers, and torpedo boats, with a modest ground-based air arm and, on the approaches to Murmansk and Belomorsk, antiaircraft and coastal artillery units.<sup>4</sup> From 1941 to 1944, the Northern Fleet's principal missions were to support the ground forces defending Murmansk against German ground attacks; to defend the internal and external sea lanes, including Allied convoys delivering supplies to Murmansk; and to disrupt German naval traffic along the northern Norwegian coast.<sup>5</sup>

By the fall of 1944, the Northern Fleet had grown significantly in both size and combat experience. Admiral Golovko now commanded a force of more than 25 submarines and almost 300 surface vessels,<sup>6</sup> including a significant number of small craft manufactured in the United States and delivered to the U.S.S.R. through lend-lease.<sup>7</sup> His air force numbered some 275 aircraft of all types.<sup>8</sup> On the Srednii and Rybachii Peninsulas were stationed two brigades of naval infantry, along with several separate numbered battalions (approximately 15,000 ground troops).<sup>9</sup>

In a directive issued on 31 March, STAVKA specified the following missions for the Northern Fleet in 1944:

- Operate jointly with the Karelian Front along its coastal flank with assault landings, artillery fire, and transporting of forces.

- Disrupt systematically the German shipping along the northern Norwegian coast and in the Varanger Fjord.
- Support the movement of convoys in cooperation with the Allies.
- Defend the region's naval bases, coastline, and internal shipping lanes against enemy operations.
- Conduct self-sustainment operations.<sup>10</sup>

### *Command Relationship*

Admiral Golovko worked in a complicated command environment. It was common in the early years of the Great Patriotic War for a fleet to be subordinated to a Front commander for a particular operation.<sup>11</sup> But changes in the structure of the Soviet Navy's central command and control apparatus were introduced in the spring of 1944, which subordinated all naval forces to a navy commander in chief in Moscow who, at that time, was Admiral N. G. Kuznetsov.<sup>12</sup> As a result, in all subsequent strategic operations in which the navy participated, the General Staff, the commander in chief of the navy, and the Main Naval Staff examined all



National Archives

A Higgins-Vosper patrol torpedo boat, manufactured in Bristol, Rhode Island, given to the U.S.S.R. in lend-lease and used by the Northern Fleet for surface, antishipping, and amphibious operations



National Archives

A Douglas A-20 Boston, given to the U.S.S.R. in lend-lease and converted for use as a torpedo bomber for the naval air forces

missions in detail, and then they were approved by *STAVKA* (see figure 4 in chapter 1).<sup>13</sup> So, while Admiral Golovko was subordinated through the Main Naval Staff to Admiral Kuznetsov for purely naval matters, he also took orders from *STAVKA* whenever his fleet conducted joint operations.

The Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation fits this pattern. General Meretskov and Admiral Golovko first met in April 1944, two months after Meretskov assumed command of the Karelian Front. Despite Meretskov's seniority in age (forty-seven versus thirty-eight) and rank (one grade level), the two quickly established a close and friendly working relationship.<sup>14</sup> In late August or early September, when *STAVKA* issued planning instructions to General Meretskov, he quickly passed them on to Admiral Golovko.

In response to either these *STAVKA* planning instructions or to a *STAVKA* directive of 26 September, which specified the objectives of the offensive and the forces to be employed, Meretskov submitted a proposal that two brigades of naval infantry attack the German left flank at the same time as his ground forces' attack on the German right flank. Both the General Staff and the Main Naval Staff disapproved Meretskov's proposal. Together, Meretskov and Golovko developed another plan, which their superiors in Moscow accepted.

Notwithstanding the supporting role of the fleet, Golovko exercised overall direction of all naval forces participating in the operation, whether at sea or on land.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Meretskov and Golovko were working in cooperation (*vzaimodeistviia*) with each other, subordinated through their respective chains of command to STAVKA.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although in a sense there was unity of command for this operation, it resided in STAVKA at the strategic level.

In the area of operations, General Meretskov could prevail on Admiral Golovko to act only within the parameters of the STAVKA-approved plan, and even that was not easily accomplished. According to Admiral V. I. Platonov, Golovko's chief of staff, no direct communications links existed between the fleet and Front forward command posts. All message traffic had to be routed through the fleet main command post at Poliarnyi, near Murmansk.<sup>17</sup>

### *Preparation*

Preparation for naval support to the offensive began in the spring of 1944, coincident with the 31 March STAVKA directive and the April meeting between the two commanders. The Main Naval Staff sent out officers to work with Golovko's staff.<sup>18</sup> In early September, Golovko received an oral confirmation from Meretskov of the plan for the offensive and, in turn, issued directives to his own subordinate commands.<sup>19</sup> The two met at Golovko's fleet headquarters on 26 September<sup>20</sup> and coordinated the final plans in a subsequent meeting on 29 September at Meretskov's command post.<sup>21</sup> These two commanders agreed that the fleet's specific missions were to blockade the coastal area occupied by the Germans, permitting neither withdrawal nor reinforcement by sea; operate jointly with the 14th Army in penetrating enemy defenses and seizing ports; support the offensive of ground forces with coastal artillery and naval gunfire in coastal areas; participate actively in the land offensive by committing naval infantry across the Srednii isthmus and in amphibious landings; and aid in the logistic support of the 14th Army by transporting men and supplies from Murmansk.<sup>22</sup>

At about this same time, the Main Naval Staff in Moscow sent Golovko a dispatch suggesting that fleet units participate in reestablishing a Soviet naval base at Petsamo.<sup>23</sup> This suggestion, which Golovko perceived as an order, led to the planning and conducting of the amphibious landing at Liinakhamari on the night of 12–13 October.

In the days and weeks preceding the offensive, units of the fleet undertook a number of preparatory measures.<sup>24</sup> In the brief time remaining before the offensive, the hydrographic service was to conduct a photo reconnaissance of the entire coastal area from the Western Litsa River to Kirkenes and a geodesic survey of all Soviet shore battery firing positions; install shore markers to facilitate naval gunfire support of ground operations and

navigational devices in port channels and on routes to fjord entrances or landing areas; establish a forward weather station to provide timely meteorological information to all fleet units; determine the precise locations of all German shore batteries that could affect planned amphibious landings; and identify and train harbor pilots to lead the amphibious landing force into Petsamo Bay and the Liinakhamari port.

All these tasks were accomplished. The results of aerial photo reconnaissance were made into charts, maps, and topographical training aids, all of which were used for target selection, landing site selection, and orientation of key personnel. The surveying of gun positions permitted the delivery of more accurate fire against known or suspected enemy targets. In prevailing arctic weather and light conditions, the navigational aids facilitated the safe operation of all fleet vessels and also ensured the accurate delivery of troops to their designated landing areas. Suspected German shore battery positions were lured into firing, then precisely located by specially instrumented patrol craft. Naval aviation was then called in to destroy the targets. Officers familiar with Petsamo Bay and the Liinakhamari harbor were sought out and detailed to the fleet landing force to guide the assault waves into Liinakhamari. Much of this work was accomplished specifically for the 9 and 12 October landings. But the effects certainly carried over to other landings as well.

A second aspect of the preparation for this operation was the training of troops in the 63d Naval Infantry Brigade, the unit designated to conduct the amphibious landings. They rehearsed loading and unloading troops, supplies, and equipment; actions ashore; and night combat. The reconnaissance detachments that participated in the raid on Cape Krestovyi were also selected and prepared. Also planned extensively was a demonstration landing in Motovskii Bay near the mouth of the Western Litsa River, which was intended to distract German attention from the main landing west of Srednii Peninsula.

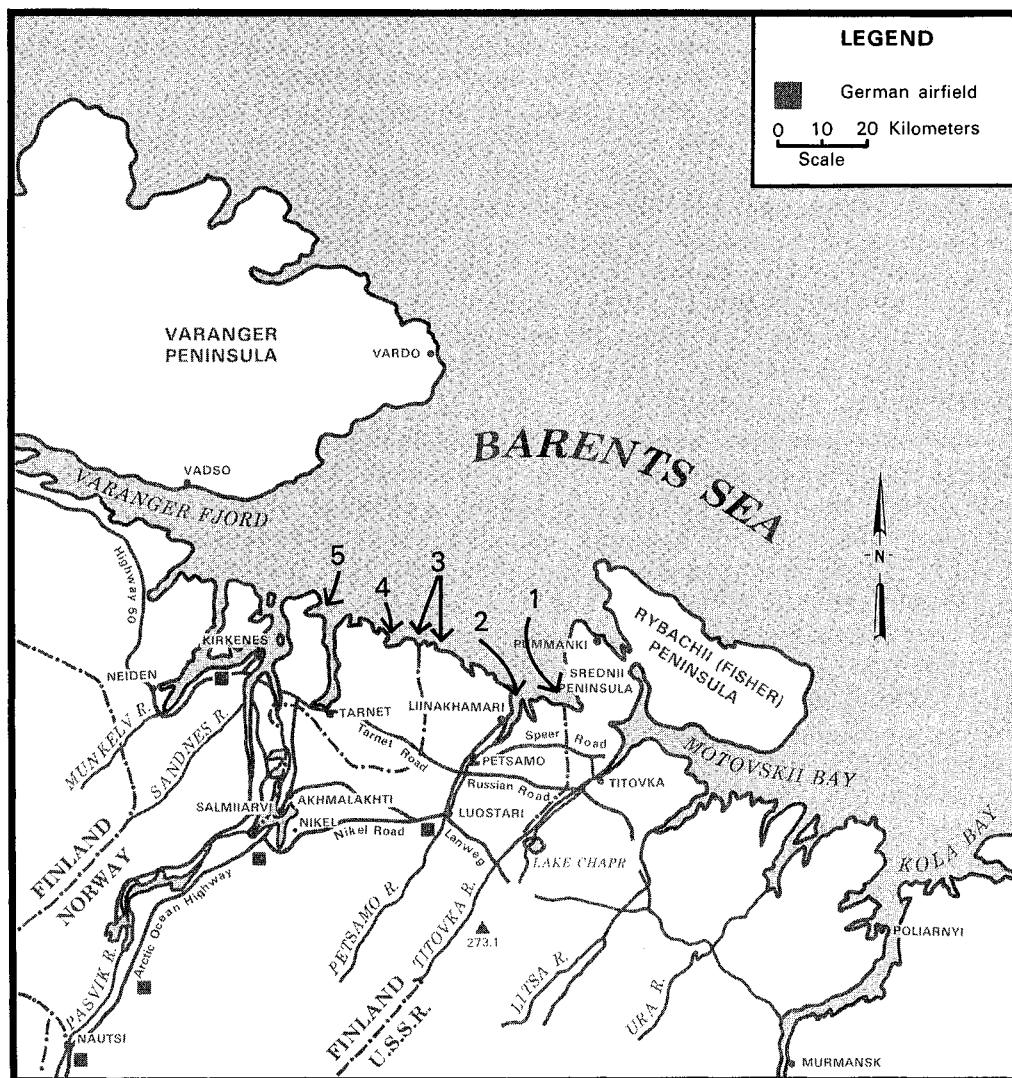
On the night of 8–9 October, Admiral Golovko moved to a forward command post on Srednii Peninsula. At or near his command post were the rear admiral commanding the amphibious landings, the naval infantry major general commanding the ground and amphibious assault troops, the captain first rank commanding the brigade of torpedo boats, and the major general commanding the fleet air forces.<sup>25</sup> At this forward command post, Admiral Golovko did not have direct communication either with the Front commander, General Meretskov, or the 14th Army commander, Lieutenant General Shcherbakov.

## *Amphibious Landings*

Forces of the Northern Fleet conducted five separate amphibious landings in support of the Soviet ground offensive. Table 7, which is keyed to map 12, provides an overview of all five landings and several points of analysis.

**TABLE 7**  
**Amphibious Landings**

	Time and Date	Location of Landing	Unit	Size of Landing Force	Size of Support Force	Other Support Activities	Nature of Opposition	Actions Ashore	Enemy Response	Outcome
1	2330 9 Oct— 0050 10 Oct	Maatvuono Bay	1st, 2d, and 3d Bns, 63d Naval Inf Bde	2,750—3,000 3 waves	Mixture of 30 torpedo cutters and subchasers	Demonstration landing at Motovskir Bay; smoke screen; shore battery fire support	Illumination by shore batteries; no enemy troops at water's edge	Attacked inland into flank and rear of German defenders	Heavy combat	Linked up with 12th Naval Inf Bde on 10 Oct; linked up with 14th Army on 13 Oct
2	2300—2400 12 Oct	Linakhamari Harbor	Composite	660 3 waves	Mixture of 14 torpedo cutters and subchasers	Smoke screen; shore battery fire support; Krestovyi raid	Heavy shore battery; piers in harbor mined; enemy garrison	Seized port and settlement; attacked Petsamo from north	Heavy combat	Controlled port by late 13 Oct; attacked southward to envelop Petsamo
3	0650—0730 18 Oct	Suola-Vuono, Ares-Vuono	4th Bn, 12th Naval Inf Bde	485 2 groups	6 subchasers	Close air support when ashore	None at landing site; small garrisons of coastal installations	Attacked west to Norwegian border; defeating light opposition	Light to moderate opposition	Reached Norwegian border by late 19 Oct; linked up with ground forces of 368th Rifle Div
4	0600—0630 23 Oct	Kobboldm Fjord	3d Bn, 12th Naval Inf Bde; 125th Naval Inf Regt	625 2 groups	10 light craft	Close air support when ashore	None at landing site	Advanced on two separate axes, cleared coast of 75-mm anti-aircraft and artillery batteries	Light opposition	Cleared zone; no significant impact
5	0455—0550 25 Oct	Holmenger Fjord	2d and 3d Bns, 63d Naval Inf Bde	835 3 waves	Mixture of 15 torpedo cutters and subchasers	3 cutters in overwatch	None at landing site	Advanced on two axes, clearing coastal installations	Light opposition	Reached Kirkenes vicinity on 27 Oct; little impact on outcome



Map 12. Northern Fleet amphibious landings

The initial amphibious landing was by far the largest of all the landings in both men and support vessels. Also, it featured a demonstration landing on the opposite side of Srednii Peninsula at Motovskii Bay that consisted of two destroyer escorts firing against German shore installations, forty-four troops who went ashore in small boats, and other small patrol craft that fired torpedoes and guns and laid smoke screens.<sup>26</sup> Despite all these efforts, however, the Germans were not the least bit distracted by the demonstration, as indicated by this conversation recorded in the war diary of the German 20th Mountain Army:

Chief of Staff, XIX Mountain Corps: "The enemy is conducting landings on both sides of Fisherhals [Rubachii Peninsula]."

Chief of Staff, 20th Mountain Army: "The landing at the sea narrows is not of long-range significance; therefore, concentrate all your assets against the landing west of Fisherhals, in order to throw the enemy back."<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, at the point selected to go ashore, there were coastal batteries but no enemy troops at the water's edge. This situation existed in all landings save the one in Liinakhamari. Whether by design or accident, it was important to the success of the landing, because the naval infantry went ashore over the bow of the boats on long wooden planks. This relatively slow process of disembarking rendered both men and boats vulnerable to fire. No doubt, this was a consideration when Golovko's staff decided to conduct all landings at night. Finally, in both this landing and the one that followed, Soviet shore batteries on Srednii Peninsula conducted counter-battery fires.

At first glance, the second landing, which was at Liinakhamari, looks unplanned. After all, the bulk of the troops were "volunteers," scraped up at Poliarnyi from submarines, subchasers, and other units of the fleet on 10 and 11 October.<sup>28</sup> These men were hurriedly transported back to the embarkation point at Pummanki and then organized into the three detachments. The other 150-plus naval infantry and the leadership for the entire force came from two regular naval infantry units. All other signs, however, point to some careful planning for this landing. The hydrographic preparation, the preselecting and detailing of harbor pilots, and the designating and training of special units for the Krestovyi raid clearly indicate the fleet commander's intent to execute the landing. The failure of his staff to allocate adequate troops was compensated for by the courageous performance of the 500 hastily assembled men. Golovko's decision to carry out the plan with seemingly unprepared forces was vindicated by the results. The naval infantry captured the port and secured the northern flank of Petsamo.<sup>29</sup>

The third landing, at Suola-Vuono and Ares-Vuono, executed just before dawn on 18 October, was significant for three reasons. First, this force assembled and embarked at Petsamo, which only three days earlier had been taken from the Germans. Second, once it reached the Norwegian border, this force, with a rifle regiment of the 368th Rifle Division, was to clear the coastal zone to the west. Finally, on 22 October, this force captured intact the 3,000-kilowatt hydroelectric station at Kobbholm Fjord, which supplied electricity to the port of Kirkenes.<sup>30</sup>

The fourth landing was also executed from Petsamo, with forces going ashore unopposed on the west shore of Kobbholm Fjord on 23 October. One element of the landing force swept the coastline to the mouth of Jar Fjord, while the other element linked up with the naval infantrymen at the power station and marched toward the middle shore of Jar Fjord, north of Tarnet, arriving there on 25 October.

For the final landing, two battalions of the 63d Naval Infantry Brigade launched from Pummanki. This force went into Holmenger Fjord on 25 October, the same morning that army ground forces assaulted Kirkenes from the east and south. Advancing on two separate axes, one element





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Senior Sergeant I. P. Katorzhnyi, who was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for his actions during the assault on Liinakhamari

swept the coastline to the west, while the other advanced southwestward toward Kirkenes. On 27 October, two days after Kirkenes was liberated, this force arrived at Jacobselv, across the fjord from Kirkenes to the northeast. Both the 23 and 25 October landings can be viewed as clearing or mopping-up actions; neither was significant in the effort to capture Kirkenes.

Two additional landings were contemplated during the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation. Sometime around 14–15 October, as sailors and soldiers closed in on Petsamo from the north and south, Admiral Golovko returned to his fleet headquarters at Poliarnyi. At that time, according to Golovko's chief of staff, Admiral Platonov, General Meretskov supported Golovko's idea for amphibious forces to seize the Norwegian ports of Vardo and Vadso on 17–18 October on Varanger Peninsula.<sup>31</sup> This bold plan, if executed successfully, would have resulted in the rapid collapse of the German defenses in front of Kirkenes, the interdicting of both land and sea routes of withdrawal, and tremendous troop and supply losses to the German XIX Mountain Corps. Platonov went to Pummanki the next day to organize the landing. A reconnaissance party had reported that the German defenses were vulnerable. A force of unspecified size embarked and informed the fleet headquarters at Poliarnyi as to its readiness to execute the landing. After a long delay, Admiral Golovko informed Platonov that Moscow would not support the plan.<sup>32</sup> The troops were then moved by boat to Petsamo and put ashore.

Perhaps one reason why Moscow did not support the plan was that the Main Naval Staff did not want to risk the personnel and equipment assets. The Germans, in spite of the rupture of their long-held positions on the Litsa front, had significant ground forces in the area between Kirkenes and Petsamo, as well as fortress battalions of the 210th Infantry Division at Vardo, Vadso, and Kirkenes. Still, it appears to be a case of too much caution. Both Golovko and Meretskov were prevented from possibly achieving a significant operational success.

A second attempt to put forces ashore on Varanger Peninsula was only partially successful.<sup>33</sup> A ten-man reconnaissance party parachuted into the hills southwest of Vardo on the night of 27 October, but the commander was killed and others of the group were injured as a result of strong winds. Radio contact with this group was lost immediately. On 29 October, three survivors of the ill-fated jump reached Soviet-controlled ports by motorboat. On the night of 30 October, the fleet headquarters reconnaissance detachment, commanded by Senior Lieutenant V. N. Leonov, went ashore twenty kilometers southwest of Vardo. This group established contact with survivors of the parachute jump, determined from contact with local civilians that the Germans had fled the area, and then moved by boat to Vardo. On the basis of this information, plans for a full-scale landing were canceled. Although the Germans had destroyed much of the port and its facilities at Vardo, they also had abandoned large stocks of food and other materiel, including small arms. Leonov and his men turned these supplies over to the Norwegians and returned to their base at Poliarnyi on 2 November.

Viewed in isolation from the 14th Army's ground offensive, the five major landings were significant accomplishments. Except for Leonov's reconnaissance detachment, fleet units were inexperienced in amphibious landings. The fleet had no amphibious landing craft and was forced to use patrol torpedo boats, minesweepers, submarine chasers, and other small craft to deliver landing forces and cargo. Under these circumstances, given the slowness and difficulty of putting large groups of men ashore, the fleet staff carefully selected landing sites that would minimize opposition to the landing force. When this was not possible, as in the case of Liinakhamari, the staff took other measures, such as the selection of harbor pilots and the Krestovyi raid, to protect the force. All landings were executed during darkness, either at night or in the early morning, and some were even covered by smoke screens. Shore-based artillery from Srednii Peninsula or naval close air supported all landings, and all landing forces successfully occupied beachheads and accomplished their tactical missions on land.

Viewed in the context of the ground offensive, however, only the first three landings were significant. The fault in the initial amphibious landing on the night of 9 October lay not in its execution, which was good, but in its timing. The operational objective of the naval amphibious and cross-isthmus attacks was to collapse the left flank of the XIX Mountain Corps and prevent withdrawal or reinforcement to the main axis. But the naval infantrymen came ashore about thirty hours after the German forces on that flank had been authorized to withdraw. The timing of this landing

and the cross-isthmus attack that followed the next morning was not of Admiral Golovko's choosing. *STAVKA* had rejected General Meretskov's proposal to execute the naval infantry attacks simultaneously with his ground offensive on 7 October.

In the case of the Liinakhamari landing, it was mainly conducted with the objective of ensuring the rapid capture of Petsamo and of establishing a naval base there. That it, at the same time, closed off Petsamo Bay as an escape route for the German forces was not a justification for the landing, because a small force of patrol boats stationed off the entrance to the fjord could have accomplished the same goal. On the other hand, given the limited size and the composite nature of the force that executed the Liinakhamari landing, a more ambitious plan, such as a linkup with the light rifle brigade blocking Tarnet Road, would likely have failed.

The importance of the third landing to the ground offensive was that it cut off a portion of Kirkenes' electricity supply. However, the last two landings on 23 and 25 October did not affect, to even a small degree, the outcome of the ground offensive.

A reasonable explanation for the lack of coordination of all five landings with the land offensive is the structure of the Soviet command and control system. Unity of command existed at the *STAVKA* level, where strategy was translated into an operational plan. At the level where the operational plan was executed, at fleet and Front headquarters, there was a distinct absence of unity of command. This is clear from the descriptions of the command relationship between the two commanders and also from the fact that no direct communication between Meretskov's and Golovko's forward command posts existed. Nor is the use of liaison officers between the two headquarters mentioned in any source. Even if the two commanders had wanted to coordinate an amphibious landing with a land force maneuver, such coordination would have been difficult. Good personal relations between the two commanders notwithstanding, the operational ground and naval command relationship was ineffective.

## *Naval Air Operations*

In the fall of 1944, the Northern Fleet had approximately 275 aircraft in its air arm for support of the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation. The aircraft belonged to the 5th Torpedo, 14th Mixed, and 6th Interceptor Air Divisions and the 118th Reconnaissance Aviation Regiment. Between them, these aviation units controlled 55 bombers, 35 ground attack aircraft, 160 fighters, and an unspecified number of reconnaissance and utility aircraft.<sup>34</sup> Naval aviation was to support the naval infantry of the Northern Defensive Region in amphibious and ground operations and to destroy German shipping assets both in port and at sea.<sup>35</sup>

Close air support was crucial to the success of the naval infantry units' ground operations. Naval air supported the 9 October amphibious landings with strikes against German shore batteries and strongpoints. On 10 and

11 October, Northern Fleet aviation assets supported naval infantry forces attacking across the Srednii isthmus.<sup>36</sup> On 12 October, naval air strikes and supply deliveries ensured that the naval infantry reconnaissance force at Cape Krestovyi survived and was replenished, and on 13 October, naval air strikes supported the capture of Liinakhamari. Naval air also supported the amphibious landings of 18 and 23 October. Of the 8,907 total sorties flown by naval aviation during the operation, 1,127 were in support of the naval ground forces.<sup>37</sup> The other 6,000-plus sorties were against German naval traffic at sea. A careful examination of all Soviet sources does not reveal an instance where naval aviation supported the army ground forces.

### *Naval Support of Army Logistic Operations*

In the preparatory phase and during the conduct of the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation, units of the Northern Fleet provided important support for the 14th Army logisticians. Beginning on 6 September, fleet assets transported men, vehicles, and supplies across Kola Bay at Murmansk.<sup>38</sup> After the capture of Petsamo on 15 October and the reestablishment of a naval base there, troops and cargo were moved into Petsamo by sea, relieving some of the pressure on the overcrowded roads. On return trips, wounded troops were brought to the rear area medical treatment facilities. In table 8 are four Soviet sources that give somewhat disparate data on the overall scope of this support.

**TABLE 8**  
**Northern Fleet Support for 14th Army Logistic Operations**

<b>Source*</b>	<b>Description</b>
Golovko	More than 25,000 troops, 24 KV tanks, 75 T-34 tanks, 19 self-propelled guns, 237 guns, 143 tracked prime movers, 271 vehicles, and a great quantity of provisions and ammunition
Shlomin	21,000 troops and approximately 20,000 tons of cargo
Egorov	5,719 troops; 118 tanks, armored cars, and self-propelled guns; 153 guns; 137 tracked prime movers; 197 wheeled vehicles; and 553,000 tons of ammunition and various types of cargo
Basov	More than 28,000 troops, 169 guns and mortars, 138 tanks and other armored vehicles, 361 trucks and tracked prime movers, and approximately 26,000 tons of ammunition and supplies

\*For full citations, see note 38.

As is evident, there is general agreement on the number of vehicles, but little else. In itself, the ability of the Northern Fleet to ferry the heavy equipment across Kola Bay ensured that the 14th Army had tank and artillery support. Without naval support, the army could have moved the

equipment, men, and supplies only by diverting scarce engineer assets from other critical tasks. Considering the time the engineers would have spent in constructing additional roads and bridges, this operation could never have been launched on 7 October without help from the Northern Fleet.

Definitely, the activities of the Northern Fleet were important to the overall success of the Petsamo-Kirkenes Operation. Northern Fleet units provided essential logistic support to the 14th Army by moving heavy equipment and supplies into the operations area before and during the offensive. Furthermore, despite the lack of close coordination between Golovko and Meretskov, ground combat units of the Northern Fleet engaged sizable German forces from 10 to 15 October along the coastal axis and prevented their withdrawal to reinforce another axis. Also, Northern Fleet air and naval units bombarded German units and installations and attacked German vessels at sea, fulfilling their mission to deny withdrawal or reinforcement by sea. All these actions contributed to the eventual success of 14th Army's ground operations.

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